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ADVANCED COURSE
1931-1932

Operations of the 1st Platoon, Company K,
38th Infantry (3d Division), in the
Aisne-Marne Offensive,
July 20 - July 23, 1918.

(Personal experience of a platoon commander)

Captain John H. Willdring, Infantry

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Butts, E. L.

"Keypoint of the Marne and Its Defense by the 30th Infantry." Menasha, Wis., George Banta Publishing Company, 1930.

Only fair as a source. While facts, presented as such, are dependable, the book was admittedly written to answer imputations as to the conduct of the author's regiment at the Marne. In consequence the volume is filled with hearsay, recollections and testimonials which make it a treacherous source for the student of military history.

Dickman, J. T.

"The Great Crusade; a Narrative of the World War." New York, D. Appleton & Company, 1927.

Very good source; accurate and free of contentions and claims; a regular army officer's analysis of the battle efficiency of his unit.

Hemenway, F. V.

"History of the Third Division, United States Army, in the World War, for the Period, December 1, 1917 to January 1, 1919." Cologne, M. Dumont Schauberg, 1919.

Good; accurate as to facts but written with the obvious desire to present these facts in their best light; slightly defensive in character; compiled for sale to troops.

Howland, C. R.

"Military History of the World War, Volume I." Fort Leavenworth, Kan., General Service Schools Press, 1923.

Very good.

Lovejoy, C. E.

"Story of the 38th Infantry." Coblenz, Germany, 1919.

An excellent source; written by a regular army officer who is at the same time a trained and talented writer. Facts have been carefully checked, blandishments and hawking modesty omitted, resulting in a conservative and accurate record.

Mondesir, L. de

"American 3d Division in the Second
Battle of the Marne."
Information File.

I get the impression that the author is
not sincere; throughout the tale he wavers
between condescension and exaggeration.

✓ Special Report, 38th Infantry, 3d
Division, July 15-27.
Information File.

The daily and periodic reports of company,
battalion and regimental commanders. Very
good sources. Taken collectively, an
excellent source.

Third Division ^M ^S ~~seets~~ Shock South of
Marne. Stars and Stripes, January
17, 1919. Pages 1 and 8.

Interesting reading but evasively written
as to facts. The apparent desire of the
author was to produce a blood-curdling
romance.

✓ Field Orders and Instructions, Third
Division, July 1 to August 2, 1918.
Second Battle of the Marne.
Information file.

Excellent source.

Wooldridge, J. W.

"The Giants of the Marne; a story
of Mc Alexander and his regiment.

Valueless; a veiled attempt to advertise
the author's war record and to curry favor
with a distinguished American general.

MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

✓ Dickman	"The Great Crusade; a narrative of the World War."
✓ Howland	"Military History of the World War." Volume I.
✓ Story of 38th	"Story of the 38th Infantry" by Lovejoy.
Lovejoy	Recollections of Major C. E. Lovejoy, then 1st Lieutenant, second-in-command of Company K; specially written and contributed to the author for this monograph.
Special Report	"Special Report, 38th Infantry, July 15-27." (The name enclosed in parenthesis pertains to the officer to whose report for the day or period reference is made.)
F.O. No 9	"Field Orders and Instructions, Third Division, July 1 to August 2, 1918. Second Battle of the Marne."
Tables	Tables of Organization, Infantry Division, G. H. Q., A. E. F., General Staff, 1st Section, August 1, 1918.
Letter, General Liggett	Letter of introduction to "The Keypoint of the Marne," by E. L. Butts.

this difference has a bearing on the subsequent operations of the American troops south of the Marne, it is briefly discussed.

Marshal von Hindenburg realized the defeat of his forces east of Rheims by the night of July 15-16, and stopped that offensive about noon on the 16th. However, he continued his pressure with the ten divisions of the Seventh (German) Army south of the Marne in an effort to cut communications between Rheims and Epernay with the eventual mission of capturing Rheims. This effort continued throughout the 16th and 17th, losing much of its momentum as a result of counterattacks by the Americans and French late in the afternoon of the 17th but continuing with decreased violence throughout the 18th.

(1) Howland,
Vol. I,
pp 301-302

(1) On the 19th, infantry combat ceased but heavy concentrations of shell and gas were delivered on Americans and Allies confronting the Seventh Army.

~~The result of this six day period of shock and~~
shelling was absorbed by the 6th Brigade (30th and 38th U. S. Infantry). (2)

(2) Letter, General
Liggett

By you
When the German assault was launched at dawn on July 15, the 3d Battalion, 38th Infantry, was in regimental reserve but by 7:00 AM the same morning it had been committed to action, covering the exposed right flank of the regiment.

The extent to which this battalion was involved in the fighting of the next six days is indicated in the report of the commander of that unit, submitted on July 21st:

INTRODUCTION

This monograph concerns itself with the participation of one platoon in pursuit of the retreating German forces during four days in the early stages of the Aisne-Marne offensive. The narrative expands to include the company, battalion and regiment in so far as the actions of these higher units influenced the conduct of operations of the platoon, or in so far as battle situations of this period brought the platoon commander into direct contact with these higher units.

The pursuit, as conducted, is generally conceded to have been satisfactory and successful. However, contrasting this pursuit with the brilliant defense conducted during the preceding week by these units, the military student is forced to the opinion that better results in the pursuit would have been obtained if certain decisions and plans, and their execution, had been more wisely handled. To that aspect of the action this paper is particularly devoted.

During the period, July 15th to 19th, 1918, all elements of the 38th Infantry had been closely engaged with the 5th and 6th German Guard Regiments in one phase of the Marne-Champagne defensive. In this action the American regiment had been successful against twice its number of the enemy.

The German conduct of battle in the Marne-Champagne operation differed in the Rheims-Chateau Thierry sector from that east of Rheims, and, since

"The mission of the battalion was to hold the woods line and to prevent infiltration of German patrols and individuals. This mission required every man in the battalion on the line."

x x x x x x x x x x x x

"Attention is respectfully called to the fact that this battalion had been constantly engaged with the enemy for seven days and on four of these days we were opposed to him not only in front but on both flanks." (3)

(3) Special
Report
(Lough)

In computing the physical endurance of a human being, it is worth while to bear in mind the physical and mental ordeal to which the men of the 38th Infantry had been subject during the seven days immediately preceding their crossing of the Marne and their pursuit northward of the retreating German columns.

The organization of the rifle platoon of 1918 differs so much from our present organization that a consideration of the combat experience of a World War platoon recommends a review of this subject.

In 1918 the rifle platoon was organized as follows: (4)

(4) Tables,
Rifle
Company

"Platoon Headquarters

1 Lieutenant, Platoon Commander.

1 Sergeant (Pistol) Assistant Platoon Commander.

4 Privates (Rifle) Runners.

First Section
(Hand Bombers)

2 Corporals

10 Privates and Privates, First Class

Organized into three bomber squads each consisting of:

- 1 Leader (Rifle)
- 1 Thrower (Rifle)
- 1 Carrier (Rifle and Pistol)
- 1 Scout (Pistol and Rifle)

Second Section
(Rifle Grenadiers)

2 Corporals (Pistol and Rifle)

7 Privates and Privates, First Class (Rifle)

Organized into three rifle grenadier squads, each consisting of:

- 2 Grenadiers
- 1 Carrier

Third Section
(Riflemen)

1 Sergeant (Rifle)

2 Corporals (Pistol and Rifle)

12 Privates and Privates, First Class

Organized into two rifle squads.

Fourth Section
(Automatic Riflemen)

1 Sergeant (Pistol and Rifle)

2 Corporals (Pistol and Rifle)

4 Privates, First Class (Pistols and automatic rifles)

8 Privates (Rifles)

Organized into four automatic rifle teams, each consisting of 1 gunner and 2 carriers; one corporal for each two guns.

NOTE: 2 automatic rifles per platoon (8 per company) ordinarily held as a company reserve, in which case corresponding automatic rifle teams are used as riflemen."

It can be seen at a glance that this organization was created to serve the needs and develop the technicians of a highly specialized position warfare.

For attack the platoon was organized into two waves, the assault wave consisting of the rifle and hand bomber sections while the rifle grenade and automatic rifle sections, representing the principal fire power of the unit, marched in the rear wave. The obvious disadvantages of this organization, particularly in open warfare, will be demonstrated and discussed later.

THE ADVANCE TO THE MARNE

(July 20)

On July 20th, the 3d Battalion, 38th Infantry, occupied a defensive position along the true crest of Hill 231 in the Bois de Conde, the left flank of the battalion connecting with Company A at Launay and the right, Company K, at les Etangs Farm in contact with the 138th French Infantry. The 1st Platoon of Company K was on the right of the company.

(5) Special
Report
(Lough)

(5)

The day was clear and sunny. No infantry fire was directed against the platoon and for the first time in nearly a week no small arms firing could be heard. Intermittent shelling of the defensive area and the ground to the east furnished the only proof of the enemy's presence. Nevertheless, it was evident that the platoon was uneasy. The sudden lapse of action brought to the minds of the men the death-like stillness that pervaded the Surmelin Valley during the 14th of July. The falling of hostile artillery shells into the timber east of the platoon's shallow trenches, where the Germans had last been seen, particularly disturbed the men. Several of them asked the platoon commander to explain this strange occurrence but, since he was ignorant of the fact that the Germans had withdrawn and lacked the tactical capacity of making that deduction, his explanations were naturally evasive and unconvincing. The men moved about restlessly, organized among themselves observation to the flanks and rear and discussed in low, excited tones the portent of this new development. Perhaps, also, they were able to detect a tinge of concern in the platoon commander. At all events a period of seven hours which should have been devoted to much-needed rest was spent in tense apprehension and searching.

It was demonstrated at this time and on numerous other occasions that with inexperienced officers and men much physical and nerve energy can

be conserved by keeping the command down to include the squad fully apprised of the situation. This pertains particularly to conditions to the front and most particularly to any hostile change of action which causes a sudden stillness on the battlefield. Thirty-six hours earlier the German withdrawal to the north bank of the Marne had begun and had been detected by our higher commanders almost at once.

(6) Howland,
Vol. I,
p 302

(6)

At 10:30 AM, the platoon commander was summoned to the company C. P., informed that the Germans were withdrawing and that in thirty minutes the 3d Battalion was to attack northward to the Marne through the Bois de Conde. Company K, in reserve, had the special mission of closing the gap between the right assault company and the French on the right as the advance proceeded. The 1st Platoon was designated to march in rear of Company M, the right assault unit, closing the first gap which appeared. The 4th Platoon, Company K, was directed to march in rear of the 1st Platoon, closing any gaps which might occur on the right of the 1st Platoon. The objective was an east and west line passing through Moulins Ruine. (7)

(7) Special
Report
(Moss)

The information about the enemy and the order for the attack electrified the platoon. Doubt and uncertainty were dispelled. In the fraction of a minute confidence and high morale returned and despite hunger and fatigue there appeared at once an eagerness for the attack.

The platoon was formed in column of twos, close order formation, for the 500-yard move to the initial point. In the close order formation the men were organized according to height into squads of seven men and a corporal and it was this organization that the platoon used for road marches, ceremonies and administration. As far as possible it followed the tactical organization of the platoon, though officially and practically they were two distinct formations.

It was not until the platoon arrived in rear of Company M that the platoon commander realized that his unit was about to participate in its first offensive action, and that the platoon must be organized to fight at a moment's notice without the time for careful assignment of squads and individuals permitted in the defense. In the training area several months earlier this offensive formation (described in the introduction) had been carefully practiced.

But on this occasion the proper command to bring the rifle and hand grenade sections into the leading wave, and the automatic rifle and rifle grenadier sections into the rear wave, precipitated great confusion. In the next five minutes, during which period the company commander exercised extraordinary and unaccustomed forbearance, the platoon leader was able to bring order and to refresh the minds of his men on dispositions for the attack. It was fortunate that the platoon was not under fire and that the assembly area was in the heart of a dense forest.

This experience gave the platoon commander his first suspicion that the organization laid down for the rifle platoon was defective. It created shifts in the responsibilities and personnel of the noncommissioned officers on the eve of combat and provided a ridiculous disposition of armament. It is true that the absence of the automatic rifles from the leading wave was corrected upon contact with the first resistance or at any earlier time when it was decided to form combat groups, but the formation of these groups even further complicated the authority of noncommissioned officers and hindered control.

Two principles, it is believed, are demonstrated:

a. That the platoon should have one organization suitable for all situations even though not ideal for all. This requirement has been satisfied in the present rifle squad in which are represented all the arms of the platoon.

b. In training officers and men, particularly during an emergency, no emphasis should be placed on either offensive or defensive warfare, other than to inculcate the offensive spirit, and no sharp line should be drawn between offensive and defensive action. For units as small as the platoon or even the company there is no essential difference between them. The counterattack and the pursuit, which are part and adjunct of the defense, are so far as the platoon is concerned pure offensive action. Conversely, offensive ^{action} for small units

resolves itself in actual combat into a series of alternating offensive and defensive engagements. These facts were not sufficiently stressed in training our troops for the World War and it is the opinion of the author that our training regulations and schools today fail to give a proper understanding of this important principle.

A few minutes after the platoon had assumed a proper assault formation, Company M moved off for the attack.

The Bois de Conde was heavily wooded and was carpeted with a thick, leafy underbrush reaching an average height of six feet. Though not so closely knit as to impede progress, the underbrush nevertheless prevented visibility in any direction for more than ten feet.

A magnetic azimuth had been given for the attack but the company commander directed his platoon leaders to disregard it. To the 1st Platoon commander, the captain said:

"March close enough to Company M to see it at all times. Go where it goes. Never mind your compass."

When the advance started the 1st Platoon was in two waves, each wave in line of squad columns. But after five minutes, in which some of the squads closed in and others strayed off, both waves were deployed at five paces. The leader of the rear section was ordered to send forward five men, marching in column of files at five paces, to maintain

the location of its infantry in the Bois de Conde, assuming, of course, that the artillery knew of the advance. Regulations should forbid artillery to support advancing infantry unless in direct communication with the battalion it is supporting.

? At 9:20 ^PAM, that evening, Company K moved in column of twos down the ravine ~~east~~ ^{west} of Moulins Ruine to Moulins. The 1st and 2d Platoons were designated to occupy positions along the railroad between the railroad junction, east of Mezy, and the Surmelin River, the 1st Platoon on the right.

ONE DAY AT MOULINS

(July 20-21)

By evening of the 20th it was generally agreed among the company officers of the battalion that the Germans were beating a hasty retreat and would give the Americans ~~at the railroad~~ no further trouble. It must have been in recognition of this popular judgment that the 1st Platoon leader marched his command without security detachments along the Moulins-Varennes Road and thence along the unimproved road to the railroad. Finding no other means of reaching the west bank of the Surmelin, the lieutenant sent his platoon across the railroad trestle in squad rushes, arriving in the platoon sector about midnight. By the time listening posts had been established on the river bank and the sector had been organized for defense, as directed, day was breaking. (8)

(8) Special
Report
(Moss)

contact with the leading section. The platoon commander, using his platoon sergeant and four runners, formed a similar link between Company M and the leading section of his platoon.

The advance continued through the woods for two thousand yards to the objective and three hundred yards beyond to the edge of the clearing on the military crest of Hill 231, overlooking the Marne Valley from Varennes to Mezy. No German infantry was encountered though the troops were under constant large and small calibre hostile artillery fire, and during the last five hundred yards they came under a heavy shelling from friendly 75-mm guns.

Though the assault formation employed was too compact, it succeeded with very few casualties in preserving contact and in fulfilling Company K's mission of closing gaps promptly as they occurred. ~~This operation forms a basis for comparison with~~ other methods of combat in woods, employed in a later phase.

As the battalion approached the edge of the clearing north of Moulins Ruine, a heavy barrage opened on the troops from both German and American batteries as though by signal. As is natural in such cases, gloom descended on the battalion.

At that time the battalion had no contact with the artillery nor had it had any contact for four hours. ~~Under the circumstances it is difficult~~ to comprehend on what information the artillery based

The first hot meal in a week came forward just after daylight and though the quantity of food received should have fed three times the number, no one was satisfied with his share.

Along with the meal came orders to bury the dead in the platoon area and it was in complying with this order that a state of war was resumed. The first man to expose himself above the railroad embankment drew a withering burst of fire from machine guns and rifles on the north bank of the river. The listening posts, withdrawing just before dawn, had reached the railroad without being fired upon.

A little later in the morning instructions were received to prepare for an inspection of personnel. Men were to shave, wash, brush their shoes and ragged clothes, and clean their rifles and side arms. The order had an instantaneous ~~repercussion~~ significance. "The regiment is going to be relieved." It spread through the platoon and regiment like a conflagration (9) and so far as is known no one attempted to stop the rumor or correct the misapprehension. The men agreed that the 38th Infantry had been at the front for one month and twenty days without relief, had stood the shock of the Friedensturm and had driven the last German to the other side of the Marne. Carrying parties came up with fantastic tales of the hordes of fresh troops jammed in the rear areas, under orders to take over the whole sector of the division. (9)

9) Story of
38th,
p 97

Late in the afternoon the regimental commander visited the platoon and commented on the excellent appearance and apparent high state of morale of the men.

"Are they ready for battle?" he asked the platoon commander.

"Yes, sir," was the reply, "but they expect to be relieved."

"Do they want to be relieved?" the colonel inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think they should be relieved?"

"Yes, sir."

"We shall see," the colonel added, as he walked off.

Of course, the 38th Infantry was not going to be relieved and was not relieved. However, at this time the company officers of the regiment had received no intimation of future plans and, while most of them surmised that the rumor was false, they were loathe to quash on conjecture the jubilation which the rumor inspired. It is believed that one element in the preservation of morale is the detection of false rumors and the official denial of those which depress the command or excite the men with foolish expectations. In this instance much disappointment would have been avoided if an official statement had been issued announcing simply that "this regiment will not be relieved at present." And it should have been distributed before any orders for combat were issued.

THE PONTOON BRIDGE AT MEZY

(July 21)

All day long Mezy had teemed with activity. Five-ton trucks, loaded with timbers and boats, had been rolling along the road from Crezancy into Mezy since early morning. Details of men could be seen at work on the south bank of the river and there was considerable small arms firing on both sides of the stream. Obviously, a bridge was to be built.

Late in the afternoon accurate information was brought to the platoon C. P. that Company F, 6th Engineers, was then building the bridge and had been doing so all day. One engineer platoon at a time advanced to the edge of the water and worked in broad daylight under direct fire of enemy machine guns at ~~easy~~^{close} range. Here the men laced the pontoons and timbers together until exhaustion and casualties necessitated their relief by another platoon.

It is believed that this operation has few parallels in military history. Company I, 38th Infantry, with one platoon, Regimental Machine Gun Company, attached, (10) covered the working parties of engineers from the south bank, but there was no bridgehead, not even one squad, north of the river. And it appears that the establishment of a bridgehead might have been achieved without much difficulty. At all events twice during the day patrols, consisting of engineers and men of Company I, crossed the river in skiffs to seize German bridge timbers and pontoons which they towed back to the south bank.

(10) Special
Report
(Young)

A great deal of the material that went into the hundred yards of pontoon bridge at Mezy had been left by the Germans on both banks of the river. It was natural then that the engineers should dedicate the foot bridge, when it had been completed later that night, by erecting a sign at the south approach, bearing in bold letters the words: "Made in Germany."

(11) Story of
the 38th,
p 98

(11)

MEZY

Shortly after dark on the 21st came the orders for the crossing of the Marne. The 3d Battalion, 38th Infantry, was to be the first unit to cross and was directed to assemble in Mezy by midnight. (12)

(12) Special
Report
(Lough)

At nine o'clock, in accordance with orders, the 1st and 2d Platoons (on the river) moved out along the railroad track for Mezy. At about the same time the German batteries opened a bombardment of Mezy and the approaches to it which continued without abatement throughout the night. Having arrived in Mezy, the men lay down in the gutters along the streets or huddled behind walls or in the cellars of demolished buildings. The town was already in ruins and what remained standing at dusk on the 21st was level with the ground at dawn of the 22d. By eleven o'clock the whole battalion had arrived, and thereafter every niche in the small town had a man or two crouching in it.

The bridge had not been completed by mid-night, necessitating a two-hour postponement of the crossing. Meanwhile, the shelling continued, filling the cavernous ruins of the town with the shrieks of shells and the thunder of falling walls. One building, in which the 3d Platoon was sheltered, collapsed, killing nine men. The roof of another caved in, pinning the commander of the 2d Platoon under a roof beam and killing or wounding a number of his men. The church caught fire shortly after midnight, followed in turn by three or four other buildings. By two o'clock the flames soared high above the town, illuminating in livid glow the streets, the fields beyond and the busy scene at the river. The explosions of large calibre mortar shells made themselves heard above the smaller projectiles and above the clatter of the machine guns along the river. (13) It was a terrifying experience which no man could survive without mental, if not physical, damage.

(13) Story of
the 38th,
p 99

The officers circulated among their men watching and encouraging them. It became quite apparent as the night progressed that the men felt that they were being tortured without good cause. Certainly their irritation was as great as their fear. If the bridge could not be finished by mid-night, why had they been brought here? Or, having arrived and finding the bridge only half finished, why had they been required to remain in this blazing inferno? These are samples of the questions they

asked. However, despite their feelings, there is no record that a single man in the battalion left Mezy that night.

This experience indicates a characteristic of the American soldier which is characteristic of America. He thinks for himself. He analyzes each situation in life in which he finds himself and he does it with remarkable accuracy. Perhaps in no army in the world are errors in leadership so quickly detected in the ranks, and consequently so costly, as in the United States Army.

The error at Mezy obviously consisted in attempting to bridge the river without a bridgehead. The fact that patrols moved back and forth across the Marne during the day is virtual proof that a bridgehead could have been established.

Furthermore, no troops should have been ordered into the town until it was known at what time the bridge was to have been finished.

Or, having made the error of assembling the battalion too soon, a member of the division staff, which prescribed the hour of the assembly (14), should have been present to permit the battalion commander to withdraw his troops until the bridge was ready.

(14) F.O. 9,
3d Div.

CROSSING THE MARNE

(July 22)

At 2:00 AM the company commander assembled his platoon leaders at the temporary company C. P. and issued orders for the attack.

The plan for the attack is stated briefly below:

a. Company I was to cross the river first, followed by Company K.

b. The mission of Company K was to capture and clear Charteves, to assist in the capture of Hill 210 and thereafter to advance through the southern part of Foret de Fere in the direction of le Charmel. Direction of attack: 30° Magnetic Azimuth.

c. The operation of Company K from the north end of the pontoon, through Charteves and to the crest of Hill 210 was to be an independent action.

After clearing the bridge on the north bank of the Marne the platoon commanders were ordered to form line of squad columns in two waves, the 1st and 4th Platoons in the leading wave (the 1st Platoon on the right) and the 2d and ^{3rd} ~~4th~~ Platoons in the rear wave. In this formation Charteves would be taken, combing the town from south to north. Then the company would execute a column right, and without changing formation proceed to the base of Hill 210, assisting the other three companies of the battalion in the capture of that hill by reducing pressure on the left flank.

After the hill was taken the battalion was ordered to assemble and reorganize in the southwestern edge of the Foret de Fere. From there the attack was to continue to le Charmel by the whole

battalion, with disposition of companies in the form of a lozenge or diamond, Company I in the lead, Company K on the left and Company M on the right. Company L was ordered to follow Company I in reserve. The plan of maneuver provided for flanking action by Company M if the resistance was on the right flank and a similar function for Company K if resistance was on the left. (14) (15) (16)

- (14) Story of the 38th, p 98
- (15) Special Report (Lough)
- (16) Special Report (Moss)

No boundaries were announced between battalions; no intermediate objectives were given.

There were no special instructions about contact to the flanks.

For the purpose of indicating the decisions and plans of higher commanders and to verify the exactness with which their intentions were transmitted to the smaller units, extracts of essential data from division and regimental orders are given:

"Our mission is to gain and maintain contact with the enemy, inflict losses on his troops and to force him to continue to retire."

x x x x x x x x x x x

"The artillery will maintain its present positions and be prepared to fire on the southern edges of the woods in the line of advance and support the advance of the infantry."

"The 7th Infantry will assemble on Fossoy and the 38th Infantry on Crezancy preparatory to crossing the river at or near Mezy."

"After crossing the river these two regiments will advance on le Charmel, the boundary between regiments being the road: Psoutier-Point ^{210 les} ~~le~~ Franquets Farm-le Charmel (to the left regiment." (17)

(17) Field
Orders
No 9

After the war General Dickman expanded on the method of advance for that day:

"The commanders were instructed therefore to operate largely in the woods in order to get rid of flanking fire from the edge of woods. Maneuvering in woods requires special practice and heretofore we had had very little experience in that kind of work." (18)

(18) Dickman,
p 119

38th Infantry:

Mission: "To push forward within the regimental sector from Charveves in a northeasterly direction towards le Charmel, keeping in contact with the enemy."

"Dispositions: 1st Battalion on the right front line, 3d Battalion on the left front line, 2d Battalion in support." (19)

(19) Special
Report
(McAlexander)

At about 2:20 AM, platoon commanders returned to their units to await orders for the crossing. It was then thought that the bridge would be completed in thirty minutes. But it was nearly 4:00 AM before word finally came to move out.

Terrific as the shelling had been all night, its intensity doubled as Company I assembled for the advance. The roaring flames from the half dozen burning buildings disclosed to the Germans every

movement in and around Mezy and they were quick to increase their shelling of the 3d Battalion as it left the edge of the town. Company I, which had served valiantly throughout the day and night of the 21st in neutralizing hostile small arms fire, had now been withdrawn, leaving the German machine gunners on the north bank of the river free to operate where and as they pleased. Needless to say they made the most of their opportunity.

So many 77-mm shells were striking the river that the water had the appearance of ^{boiling.} ~~hailing.~~

The battalion was formed in column of files and for some reason marched with a dirge-like cadence, or so it seemed. During the actual crossing the rate of advance seemed particularly slow with machine gun bullets chopping the water underfoot and whining overhead, while twenty or thirty feet away artillery shells shot geysers high into the air, spewing water ~~over the bridge and the troops.~~

It might well be stated here that not one friendly shell assisted the battalion in its crossing nor was any artillery support furnished this battalion in any of its other engagements on this day. (20)

(20) Lovejoy

(22) Lovejoy;
Special
Report
(Moss)

HILL 210 (22)

(July 22)

After crossing the river Company K moved to the west to clear the head of the bridge and formed in line of squad columns, as planned, for the capture of Charteves. Desultory fire of small arms was

(21)
Special
Report
(FREEHOFF)

directed at the company but no change of formation was made. The town was entered without difficulty and the company proceeded to its northern limits with only occasional hostile shots or bursts of fire. Several snipers and a machine gun crew were captured during the march through the streets. After passing out of the northern boundary of the village the company changed direction to the northeast, facing Hill 210, and halted just at dawn for a hasty reorganization. Patrols were sent out by the company to find the 7th Infantry which was scheduled to come up on our left flank at that time, and this contact was made.

A lesson in the operation of seizing towns is demonstrated by the capture of Charteves by Company K. Nearly an hour later when Company B crossed the bridge and formed an advance guard, preparatory to its advance on Jaulgonne along the Charteves-le Charmel Road, the company was taken by surprise in receiving heavy machine gun and rifle fire in the left flank of its formation from a town which was reported to be in friendly hands. (21) Seizing a town consists of more than simply walking through a few of its streets from one boundary to the other.

At about 4:15 the advance by Company K on Hill 210 began. Machine gun and rifle firing opened on the company from the summit of the hill and from the edge of the timber along its western slope. The leading sections of the two leading platoons were

deployed but the advance was not halted until the company had reached the top of the long, precipitous approach to the woods on Hill 210. At some points the grade of this incline was as much as 40 degrees. One hostile machine gun was rushed and captured as the leading wave approached the edge of the woods and a dozen prisoners were taken.

Contact was soon gained with the remainder of the battalion in the edge of the Forêt de Fere (at about 4:30 AM) and the company was directed to halt.

Reconnaissance patrols were sent out to locate the 7th Infantry on the left but they did not return. (They were captured or killed.) The same results attended the dispatch of patrols to the Charveves-Jaulgonne Road to gain contact with the 1st Battalion. After an hour larger patrols were assigned the mission of gaining this contact with units on the right and left. These patrols ~~unavoidably~~ became involved with the German rear guard and were cut off from the battalion. Those few who were able to avoid death or capture rejoined the battalion on the following day. (23)

(23) Special
Report
(Lough)
(24) Lovejoy;
Special
Report
(Moss)

THE ADVANCE TO CROSS ROADS 224. (24)

At 7:30 AM, three hours after the capture of Hill 210, without contact on either flank, the battalion moved off in the direction of le Charmel, using the lozenge formation described earlier.

The Foret de Fere is a heavily wooded area extending along the plateau (Hill 210) from a point just northeast of Charteves to the outskirts of le Charmel. The only clearing in this strip of forest consists of the cultivated fields around les Franquets Farm. It was through these woods and along this ridge that the 3d Battalion operated on July 22.

For thirty minutes the advance continued in accordance with the battalion plan. The Germans had scattered machine guns through the woods at advantageous points and, when the fire of these machine guns opened on Company I, one flank company or the other moved up and silenced the guns by enfilade fire.

The rear/guard action of the Germans embraced three other principal agencies: a. The advancing American infantry was under the constant fire of light artillery. b. Enemy planes flew just over the tree tops, firing machine guns and dropping bombs. c. Snipers, concealed in the trees, had been sprinkled through the woods with instructions to permit assaulting echelons to pass and then to fire into them from the rear, or to fire at runners, reserve units and command parties. This at all events is what the snipers did.

At about 8:00 AM the commander of the 1st Platoon (Company K), the base unit of the company, observed that Company I was cutting across the front of his platoon. He reported this to the captain who after personal reconnaissance ordered a change of direction to 20 magnetic azimuth, the bearing on which Company I was then marching.

During the next thirty minutes German resistance tightened. Machine gun nests were encountered more frequently and considerably more fire was coming from snipers in the rear.

At 8:15 AM a corporal from the 1st Platoon, in charge of a connecting group between Companies K and I, reported to his platoon leader that nearly an hour earlier he had lost contact with Company I. Then, in trying to locate Company I he had become separated from his own company. The corporal stated that he had been lost for three-quarters of an hour. This was impossible. He could not have been out of contact for more than fifteen minutes. The platoon leader directed the corporal to repeat his report to the company commander. The captain decided to send the corporal and his contact party out again to the east to look for Company K, and to continue the advance on 30° magnetic azimuth. ?

~~The advance went on for another twenty or~~
thirty minutes under a steadily increasing resistance until the assault platoons reached an unimproved road about fifty yards from the edge of a clearing just becoming visible through the trees. This area is now known to be just east of Cross Roads 224, almost due north of les Franquets Farm.

As the two platoons reached the road a terrific burst of fire met them from the edge of the woods, pinning both units to the ground. After a

brief reconnaissance the company commander ordered one of his support platoons (the 2d) to a position on the left flank of the line while the 3d Platoon was held under cover in support.

SITUATION ON THE FLANKS

In order to give a thorough understanding of the situation and to point out more clearly the tactical lessons of this pursuit, the account of Company K is suspended temporarily to insert briefly what had occurred in the remainder of the regiment.

3d Battalion

The 3d Battalion, less Company K, proceeded through the Foret de Fere; at about 8:30 AM it reached the southern edge of the clearing about 600 yards southwest of les Franquets Farm where it encountered determined resistance. Frontal attack supported by enveloping movements failed to dislodge ~~the enemy and the action on this line continued until~~ orders come from the regimental commander to hold at Franquets Farm until the 7th Infantry came up on the left. (25)

(25) Special
Report
(Lough)

At 10:00 AM the battalion commander had no contact on either flank and was temporarily out of contact with one of his companies.

1st Battalion

By 4:45 AM the 1st Battalion had completed its crossing of the Marne and was formed in column with Company B as advance guard for its march on le Charmel along the Chartevès-Jaulgonne Road through

the valleys of the Marne and Belle Aulne Rivers. As it proceeded northward it was unable to gain contact with the 3d Battalion on its left or the French on its right. The advance guard and the main body were under almost continuous fire from the wooded slopes of Hill 210 and from the French sector. Nevertheless, by the use of strong flank guards they were able to preserve a rather regular rate of advance. At 10:00 AM the point of the advance guard was about midway between Jaulgonne and le Charmel, in the vicinity of Argentol, and shortly after noon was able to push its way into le Charmel.

During the afternoon the regimental commander ordered the 1st Battalion, whose position had become untenable, to withdraw to Jaulgonne. (26)

(E) Special
Report
(McAlexander)
(Lough)
(Keely)

At 9:00 AM the pursuing troops were disposed as follows:

7th Infantry: just north of Mont St. Pere.

~~3d K, 38th Infantry: at CR 224~~

3d Battalion, 38th Infantry, less Company K: along the edge of woods, SW of les Franquets Farm.

1st Battalion, 38th Infantry (leading element): in the vicinity of Argentol.

138th (French) Infantry: SE of Barzy and advancing slowly.

It is important to ⁿote that at this time no

(27) Special Report one of these units was in contact with any other. (27)
Report
(Keely)
(Lough)
(McAlexander)

(28) Special
Report
(Moss);
Lovejoy

COMPANY K AT CROSS ROADS 224 (28)

At 9:00 AM Company K found itself in a desperate situation. Despite the three platoons on the line, the Germans had undisputed fire superiority. Moreover, Company K had two exposed flanks, both of which were being raked with flanking fire. In the trees between the road and the edge of the clearing, the Germans had posted riflemen with perfect concealment from the road. Men of Company K, in complete defilade from the front, were struck in the head or back with bullets from the trees. Either that, or the ground beside them was plowed up with shots coming from overhead. Naturally these tactics played havoc with the morale of Company K. The air seemed clouded with splinters, sawdust and falling leaves.

For nearly two hours this exchange of fire continued and as time advanced it became increasingly apparent that Company K was approaching either annihilation or capture.

Meanwhile, the captain ordered patrols to the southeast in an attempt to gain contact with the remainder of the battalion. Patrols were also dispatched to both flanks to ascertain the exact location and strength of the enemy. From the men of these patrols, who reconnoitered on their bellies along the slightly sunken road, it was learned that the Germans occupied an L-shaped trench about fifty yards north of the edge of the woods. One section of the trench was parallel and the other perpendicular to our line of advance. It was estimated that about 200 Germans opposed the company.

At about eleven o'clock one of these flank patrols observed a hostile force of about fifty men ? moving south through a drainage ditch on the right flank. Just a short time earlier word had been received from the left flank that strong hostile patrols were working their way southward through the woods.

When the captain received this information he issued orders to withdraw. Substantially his order was as follows:

"The company will withdraw."

"We will retire from our present position by platoons and assemble in the woods 250 yards south of here."

"Wood (in command of the 4th Platoon), having the most exposed position, will withdraw first. The 2d Platoon will leave next. When these units have reached a concealed position in the woods in rear, the 1st Platoon will follow."

It would be sheer nonsense to contend that the company commander did not realize the full seriousness of the situation or that he was not fearful of the fate of his company and himself. Just before he started to issue his order deep apprehension and complete resignation to apparent disaster were plainly visible in the faces of his officers. Unquestionably, this ^moment represents an incident in battle where everything depended on leadership, upon the composure, dignity and resoluteness of the commander.

The experiences of the day point to certain lessons:

a. Heavily wooded terrain is of great value to any retreating force which understands how to use it. The German rear/guard demonstrated that.

b. Conversely, pursuit through woods is exceedingly difficult and requires coordination in some detail, particularly with war-time troops, if it is to be successful.

c. The great need of the 22d was contact between units, and division and regimental orders should have contained special mention of the necessity and responsibility for contact. Instead, the emphasis in all orders throughout the chain of command centered on contact with the enemy, which proved to be an unnecessary concern and which in any case is subordinate to liaison. In warfare in woods contact on the flanks should take precedence over all else, ~~over direction, over rapidity of advance, over the~~ mission itself, because without contact no result commensurate with the effort can be expected. This, in the opinion of the author, is so vital to success in woods fighting that it should be given prominent mention in the order directing the engagement, with instructions as to method and ironclad declarations as to responsibility. This contention is illustrated in the dilemma in which the C. O., 3d Battalion, found himself after the capture of Hill 210. He attempted for three hours to gain liaison and, though he was unsuccessful and knew his situation to be treacherous, he nevertheless felt that his mission

And it is demonstrated that the captain met the acid test of leadership and won the spontaneous support of his lieutenants, and through them of his whole company, by issuing calmly and clearly a simple, workable order. No thought was given by any subordinate as to why the company found itself in that predicament. The need of the time was for a leader, big enough to be normal under these abnormal circumstances, and the ability of the captain to see and meet this simple requirement, difficult though it must have been for him under the conditions, saved the company and stamped him as a leader.

The company disengaged itself and withdrew into the forest in good order and with relatively few casualties. The 4th Platoon ceased firing by squads and retired to the rear in squad rushes. The 2d Platoon followed the example of the 4th. The volume of enemy fire by this time was so great that the 1st Platoon commander ordered his unit to the rear in platoon rushes. This movement caused a wide dispersion of the unit and some lack of control which were rectified before the platoon reached the company rendezvous, 250 yards south of the road. The commander of the 3d Platoon, in support, misunderstood the captain's order, continuing an uninterrupted retreat to the Marne. He rejoined the company on the following day. With this exception the retirement occurred according to plan. From the rendezvous the company made its way south in a widely extended formation and after a march of about one mile gained contact with the battalion.

obligated him to push on. And under the orders he had, it was a very natural thing to do.

d. The assignment of sectors should have been made to brigades instead of to regiments. This was one occasion when the very closest supervision and coordination of units ~~was~~^{were} necessary to achieve the full fruits of the pursuit. Toward this end the fullest advantage should have been taken of the service and talents of the brigade commanders.

e. Intermediate objectives should have been assigned. For instance, a glance at the map shows that les Franquets Farm, the one clearing in the Foret de Fere, would develop as a point of stern resistance. Still no mention is made of it in either division or regimental orders. The division should have directed the 7th Infantry to assist the 38th Infantry in the capture of les Franquets, and the regimental order should have required the 1st Battalion to assist the 3d Battalion at this point. With help from either unit the 3d Battalion would have seized les Franquets Farm, could have kept abreast of the 1st Battalion and could have protected the left flank of that unit at le Charmel.

Because of the absence of liaison, intermediate objectives and rallying points, the pursuing forces, greatly superior in number, disintegrated into a large number of relatively small parties against which the German rear guard was able to conduct a rather successful defense.

f. The loss of contact between Company K and the remainder of the battalion proves just one thing. In dense woods contact - physical, visual contact - takes precedence over dispersion of force, depth of formation and direction. Company I was responsible for direction. The other companies of the battalion should have linked themselves to Company I at close range and should have gone where Company I went, regardless of what that course was. And, to make this course of action a dead certainty, the battalion order should have read:

Direction: for Company I, 30° magnetic azimuth; all other companies will conform to direction established by Company I.

It is true that the blame might be fixed on the 1st Platoon leader who commanded the base unit. However, in combat the platoon commander is a busy

a unit he cannot see, he must delegate that responsibility to another. In woods it is a far better scheme to close the formation in and accept the disadvantages and losses arising from too compact formations.

In this particular instance loss of direction brought Company K to the extreme left of the 7th Infantry sector at which point the company became involved in a gruelling combat, attended by heavy losses, for no purpose.

g. The action of Company K at CR 224 was, it is believed, properly conducted, except that the withdrawal should have occurred earlier, an hour or more earlier.

Viewed at leisure in retrospect it can be seen that an opportunity for brilliant achievement was presented to Company K at Cross Roads 224. Had the company commander seized the offensive on contact, sending one or both of his support platoons to envelop the hostile resistance, it is quite possible that he would have driven off or captured the defenders. Having done this, he could have turned the company to a full flanking action against les Franquets Farm, which unquestionably would have dislodged the Germans in that position.

Obviously, such an operation would have been risky - "free-lance" warfare - and the company commander cannot be criticized for deciding against it.

h. It is believed that the German rearguard action was well organized and conducted.

i. So far as armament is concerned, this operation demonstrates that infantry alone should not be thrown into battle, even in pursuit, against a hostile force, well supported by artillery and air service. The time has come, it is believed, to add this deduction to the older, established tactical principles.

AT FRANQUETS FARM

Company K was assigned a position in the line on the left flank of the battalion along the edge of the woods southwest of les Franquets Farm. Since the 7th Infantry had not yet come up, that flank was still exposed. At about 4:30 PM the 1st Battalion connected with the 3d, making a continuous line from les Franquets to Jaulgonne.

CONCLUSION

General Dickman has stated that "it was important to attack the enemy so as to accelerate his departure and to prevent him from carrying off his supplies and equipment and vast stores of artillery ammunition accumulated for the advance to Paris. x x x General de Mondesio ^{x E} the corps commander ^J did not want the troops to wait for the bridges, wanted them to swim the Marne, if necessary."

2.
(30) The Great
Crusade,
p 120

(30)

The lesson of this pursuit lies, it is believed, in overemphasis on speed in pushing the retreating columns and a heedless disregard throughout the chain of command for the technical and tactical difficulties attendant upon such speed. It can be safely stated that a vigorous pursuit, like any other combat operation, meets with complete success only if this vigor is weighed with the cardinal principles of war in planning and executing the pursuit.

QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE OPERATIONS
OF 1st PLATOON, COMPANY K, 38th INFANTRY.

1. The organization of the rifle platoon during the World War:

- (1) Resembled the present organization of the rifle platoon.
- (2) Provided for subdivisions according to armament.
- (3) Provided for subdivisions according to tactical employment.
- (4) For the purpose of meeting every situation in battle was superior to our present organization.

Answer: (2)

2. The 3d Battalion, 38th Infantry:

- (1) Arrived in Mezy on time.
- (2) Arrived in Mezy too late.
- (3) Arrived in Mezy too soon.
- (4) Having arrived in Mezy too soon, withdrew to the fields surrounding the town until the bridge was completed.

Answer: (3)

3. Company F, 6th Engineers, constructed the bridge at Mezy:

- (1) Under cover of a bridgehead.
- (2) Under cover of a few squads on the north bank of the Marne.
- (3) Without protection from any source.
- (4) Under protective fire from Company I, 38th Infantry, from south bank of river.

Answer: (4)

4. The 3d Battalion, 38th Infantry, advanced from rendezvous on Hill 210:

- (1) After liaison had been gained on right flank.
- (2) After liaison had been gained on both flanks.
- (3) Without liaison on either flank.
- (4) After liaison had been gained on left flank.

Answer: (3)

5. At Cross Roads 224, Company K:

- (1) Attacked the opposing element of the German rear/guard.
- (2) Adopted deployed defense.
- (3) Moved around the resistance.
- (4) Withdrew.

Answer: (4)

Aisne-Marne Offensive

July 20-23, 1918

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Yards

